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Emojis Are Everywhere

How Emojis Conquer New Contexts


Christa Dürscheid

Abstract. This article first presents facts and figures about emoji use, which, as is pointed out, is by no means restricted to private everyday communication (Section 1). Next, two studies are discussed, shedding light on the following questions: on the one hand, whether emojis are indeed preferred by younger people and, on the other, which impression the use of specific emojis with positive or negative connotations leaves with the addressee of text messages (Section 2). The heart of this essay follows in Section 3—it focuses on emoji use during the COVID-19 crisis (which, at the time of writing, is still ongoing). Here, observations concerning new forms of emoji use on Facebook and in types of video chat (such as Zoom and Skype) are collected. Among these, two are discussed in more detail: firstly, the possibility to react to Facebook posts with a hugging face, which is supposed to help users take a symbolical stance “against loneliness.” Secondly, the fact that in video chats, emojis can now be sent as so-called real time reactions. This way, it is possible, for example, to send a thumbs down sign emoji while another person is speaking. In Section 4, an outlook is given, raising the question of how emoji use can be described at a linguistic level now that, given this new development in video chats, emojis are used also in oral communication and thereby cease to be mere complements to or substitutes for writing.

1. A Story of Success

Emojis are everywhere—especially whenever people exchange information with acquaintances, friends, or family via messenger services (such

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as WhatsApp), post pictures of their restaurant visits on Instagram, or send holiday greetings via Facebook. Furthermore, emojis are not only used in private communication (as one may assume given these examples) but can also be found in business communications and in the context of mass media: for instance, companies embellish their newsletters with emojis; advertising agencies rely on emojis in the design of their advertisements and billboards; T-shirts, posters, games, books as well as films are marketed with emojis, and even police stations use them to render their Facebook posts more informal and thus (perhaps) more likeable (cf. Fig. 1).

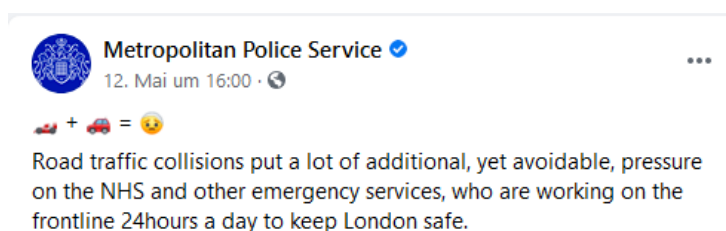


FIGURE 1. Emojis in Facebook


As research on the use of emojis has gained pace, there is an abundance of literature on the topic, which cannot be treated extensively within the scope of this short essay (but see Seargeant, 2019, who deals with the historical, political, social, and linguistic context of emoji use). Two points should nevertheless be mentioned:

Firstly, the word *emoji* comes from Japanese. It is a combination of *e* 'image' and *moji* 'character'.¹ The (coincidental) phonetic similarity with the word *emoticon* does not reveal anything about how emojis are used. This is evident from the example in Fig. 1, in which none of the three emojis express emotions: two depict vehicles while the third one is the "Face-with-Head-Bandage-Emoji".

Secondly, emojis are not only popular in private and more and more official contexts but are also a recurring subject in public discourse (cf. Fig. 2). For example, newspaper articles often raise the question of whether writing with emojis could have long-term effects on the use of language in general and discuss the consequences that could potentially ensue if written communication were to be based increasingly on images (e.g., photos, stickers, GIFs, emojis).

1. In Japan, the history of emojis reaches back to the last century. Shigetaka Kurita is regarded as their inventor. In the late 1990s, he designed—for the largest mobile phone provider in Japan at that time—small black and white graphics that were used to complement text.

Interestingly, these articles often focus on young people. Could they lose the ability to express themselves correctly in writing because of the heavy use of emojis in the messages they compose? Another question that is repeatedly debated relates to whether emojis could form the basis of a new universal language. From a linguistic standpoint, this question is usually negated, as it is argued that emojis can supplement writing but not substitute it. The crux of this claim is that there exists no fixed relation between emojis and what they represent (see Dürscheid and Meletis, 2019, pp. 172–176 for an in-depth discussion of this topic), making it infeasible to represent complex sentence structures using only emojis.² In this regard, we agree with Philip Seargeant's assessment: "Emoji may be a lot more intuitive than alphabetic writing systems, which you have almost no chance of interpreting if you can't read them. But they're still semiotically fairly complicated. And their meaning often isn't that transparent" (Seargeant, 2019, p. 20).³

Since emojis originated in Japan, it is unsurprising that the original meanings of many emojis reflect Japanese culture and language use. Take, for example, the poop emoji , which is frequently added in Japanese text messages to wish someone good luck. By comparison, in western countries, this emoji is used in negative contexts or when writers comment critically on someone else's statements.⁴ Scrolling through the long list of emojis on mobile phones, one instantly becomes aware of how many different emojis are currently available for use. Among them are emojis that represent the expression of certain feelings (e.g., laughing or sad face) but also emojis that stand for people of different professions, various types of food, sports activities, animals, vehicles, flags, and also symbolic signs (such as plus and minus, religious symbols, and the heart emoji, which is available in different colours).

Inserting these small colourful images into texts by means of few clicks is possible only because they are included in Unicode, the international character set that is the basis for all digital writing today (see <https://home.unicode.org/>). Of course, it had already previously been possible for writers to express what they mean by using additional graphic means: In the 1990s (and to some degree today still), people de-

2. Just consider 'writing' the following sentence using only emojis: *I would have liked to come yesterday, if I had the time*. Neither the grammatical information in this sentence (e.g., tense, mode) nor the logical connection between the two parts of the sentence can be expressed with emojis.

3. Note that Ph. Seargeant uses *emoji* as the plural of *emoj*. Indeed, in Japanese, the plural does not change, while in English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, *emoji* and *emojis* both are acceptable plurals. We prefer *emojis* as the plural form in this essay.

4. More information about the meaning of emojis can be found at <https://emojipedia.org/> (26/8/2020). It was Jeremy Burge who launched this website in 2013; he also introduced the "World Emoji Day," which takes place each year on July 17th.

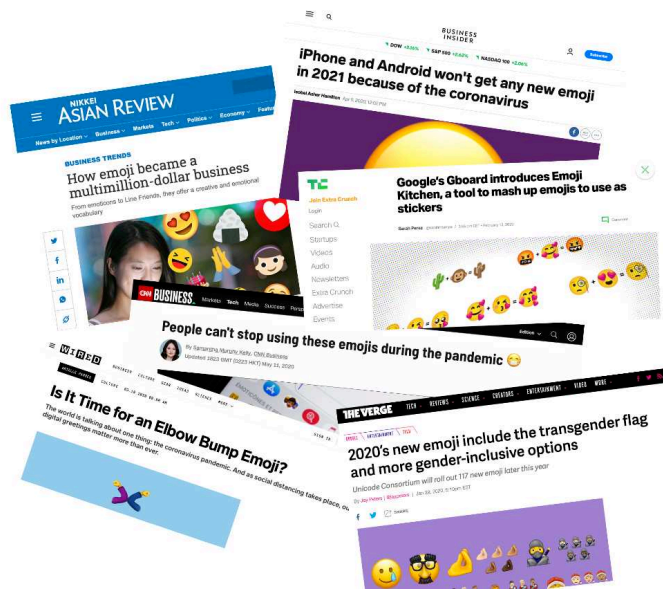


FIGURE 2. Emojis in public discourse

signed their emails and text messages with smileys in ASCII code such as, for instance, :-). Notably, when the first emojis were integrated into Unicode in 2010, many writers changed their habits and started using emojis instead of ASCII signs.

Currently, Unicode contains more than 3,000 emojis, with new ones being added on a yearly basis by the Unicode consortium, which is responsible for the admission. Given the multitude of proposals, it is obviously impossible for the consortium to approve every application for inclusion of an emoji. The approval process is guided by several criteria. For instance, a proposal for an emoji that is intended to promote a specific product (e.g., a brand of beverage) will not be successful. By contrast, if the applicants manage to provide evidence that a proposed emoji is of socio-political relevance, it has a far better chance of being accepted. It was, in fact, this criterion that led to the current situation in which many emojis (and variants of emojis) in Unicode represent people of different skin colours and diverse relationship constellations.

2. Adolescents, WhatsApp, and Emojis

According to the 2018 *PEW* study, people in the US aged 18–49 years have reached a near saturation level of 97% in their adoption of the internet.⁵ Interestingly, the number of people who have access to the internet only via their smartphones (instead of through traditional broadband services at home) has increased from 12% in 2016 to 20% in 2018. This suggests a noteworthy development towards “smartphone-only” internet users.

It is, of course, important to consider the purposes for which these people use the internet on their mobile phones, as this affects the question of whether or not they use emojis. For example, if someone has written a scientific essay and wishes to publish it on the internet or sends a business letter by email, he or she will probably not use emojis. This stands in stark contrast to messages sent via WhatsApp or posted on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, contexts in which it might even—to put it bluntly—raise eyebrows if no emojis are used at all. Assumedly, these applications enjoy particular popularity among young people. Therefore, let us briefly look at a series of German surveys, the so-called *JIM* studies (*Jugend, Information, Medien*), in which young people are regularly asked about their use of various media.

The most recent *JIM* study from 2019 shows that 93% of the 12- to 19-year-olds ($n = 1,200$) communicate via WhatsApp several times a week.⁶ The survey also found that WhatsApp is the most popular internet application, followed by Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook (in this order). This, notably, does not necessarily mean that adolescents use emojis more frequently than members of other age groups. In fact, there exists a study that makes the case for the opposite—if only on the basis of a very small sample ($n = 120$); in this study, the authors provide evidence that people above the age of 35 use more emojis than younger people (see Tschernig and Hertzberg, 2015). In the conclusion of their paper, they also address the question that is discussed so often both in public discourses as well as in research: What purpose do emojis serve in text messages? Since a growing number of studies deal with this matter (see, for example, Beißwenger and Pappert, 2019; Dürscheid and Frick, 2016; Herring and Dainas, 2017), only three aspects of this question shall be addressed in the following:

5. The *PEW* (Pew Research Center) presents itself as “a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world”. It conducts “public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis and other empirical social science research” in order to provide information for current discourses. For more information, see <https://www.pewresearch.org> (26/8/2020).

6. Cf. <https://www.mpfs.de/studien/jim-studie/2019/> (26/8/2020).

Firstly, as has been argued above, emojis can be used to make texts “more informal and likeable”. To put it differently, they can assume an indexical function, meaning emojis potentially ascribe certain characteristics to a text (and thus to the producer of the text). This is underlined in an online survey ($n = 385$) that is part of a psychological study conducted by Wera Aretz. The survey’s results lead to the following conclusion: “The author of a text using positively connotated emojis [e.g., 😊, CD] is perceived significantly warmer and more likeable, an author using no emojis is perceived more assertive, and an author using negatively connotated emojis [e.g., 😡, CD] as irritated and angry” (Aretz, 2019, p. 37).

Secondly, emojis can also be used for an additional illustration of what is already stated explicitly in the text. This is the case, for example, when emojis such as ☀️, 🌊 and 🏖️ are added to utterances such as *We are really excited for summer.*

Thirdly, emojis can be used to substitute parts of words, entire words, or noun phrases (see *I’m on my 🚲, I’ll take the night 🌙*). Important questions in this respect are whether writers do this to reduce typing effort or (just) see it as a kind of grapho-stylistic play. In any case, this type of use remains relatively rare. This is evident from the corpus studies of a Swiss research project (cf. <https://www.whatsup-switzerland.ch>) that is based on an extensive data collection of approximately 750,000 WhatsApp messages.

3. Emojis During the COVID-19 Crisis

Given that the pandemic has such a deep impact on our lives, it is unsurprising that it also affects the way emojis are used. Strikingly, as a result, a specific emoji is currently used much more frequently than before: the “face with medical mask emoji” 🤒.⁷ Interestingly, at the same time, the relative use of the positive smiley-face emoji has dropped. As stated on Emojipedia, “emoji showing more negative or ambiguous emotions, like anger or pleading, have been ticking up, suggesting people are more uneasy right now”.⁸ Thus, in an analysis of 68 million tweets from April 2020, the pleading face emoji ranked as the third most popular emoji (cf. Fig. 3). As shown in the table, from August 2018 to April 2020, the two emojis that top the ranking have remained the same, while there has been a change in third place.

7. Here and in the following, we refer to surveys conducted by Emojipedia and reported on their website. Cf. <https://blog.emojipedia.org/spread-of-the-coronavirus-emoji> (26/8/2020).

8. Cf. <https://blog.emojipedia.org/emoji-use-in-the-new-normal> (26/8/2020).

Top Ten Emojis used on Twitter

Source: Emojipedia analysis of 68 million tweets published May 2020.
<https://blog.emojipedia.org/emoji-use-in-the-new-normal>

Rank	Aug 18	Emoji %	Apr 19	Emoji %	Aug 19	Emoji %	Apr 20	Emoji %
#1		14.39%		13.96% (▼ 2.94%)		13.10% (▼ 6.22%)		12.45% (▼ 4.92%)
#2		6.41%		6.97% (▲ 8.70%)		7.60% (▲ 9.11%)		8.48% (▲ 11.57%)
#3		4.70%		4.25% (▼ 9.66%)		4.24% (▲ 0.55%)		5.17% (▲ 83.47%)
#4		4.45%		4.22% (▼ 5.23%)		3.81% (▼ 10.45%)		4.15% (▲ 15.30%)
#5		3.59%		3.60% (▲ 0.34%)		3.64% (▲ 1.28%)		4.13% (▲ 2.81%)
#6		3.31%		3.27% (▲ 48.36%)		3.60% (▲ 9.96%)		3.26% (▼ 10.60%)
#7		2.92%		2.77% (▼ 4.98%)		2.82% (▲ 79.28%)		3.25% (▼ 14.52%)
#8		2.20%		2.75% (▼ 16.99%)		2.70% (▼ 2.66%)		2.71% (▲ 24.97%)
#9		2.05%		2.13% (▲ 4.20%)		2.55% (▼ 7.29%)		2.22% (▼ 17.56%)
#10		1.95%		1.98% (▲ 4.74%)		2.17% (▲ 1.62%)		2.11% (▲ 19.09%)

FIGURE 3. Emoji ranking <https://blog.emojipedia.org/emoji-use-in-the-new-normal/> (4/9/2020)

Note that for purposes of comparison, it would be interesting to learn whether the pandemic also effects users’ emoji preferences on Facebook. On Emojipedia, no studies approaching this question are available. However, it is noteworthy that in the spring of 2020, Facebook introduced a new emoji that performs a virtual hug. It can be selected among other “online reactions” such as 👍 or ❤️ (cf. Fig. 4). According to Facebook, the hugging face emoji is supposed to symbolically take a stance “against loneliness” (cf. Fig. 5).

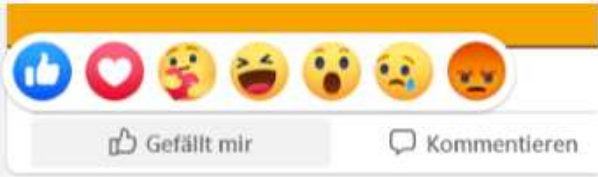


FIGURE 4. Online reactions on Facebook

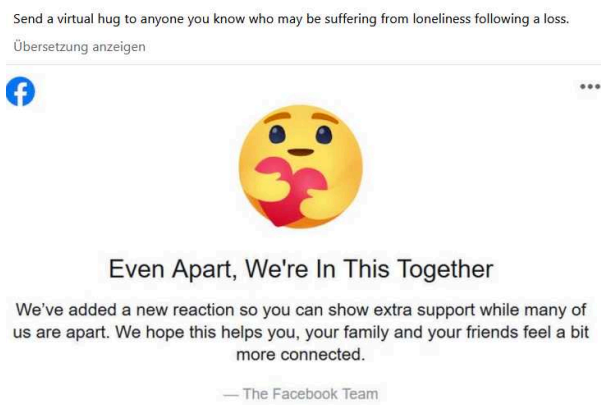


FIGURE 5. The hugging face emoji <https://www.facebook.com/lincolnccfh/posts/2596013993946489> (4/9/2020)

As mentioned above, each year, a set of new emojis is integrated into Unicode. Due to the pandemic, the Unicode consortium has postponed the release of its next version, Unicode 14.0, for six months (see <http://log.unicode.org/2020/04/unicode-140-delayed-for-6-months.html>, (26/8/2020)). Specifically, Unicode 14.0 was originally planned to be released in March 2021, with new emojis being made available for the public in the fall of 2021. Given the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, this will now probably not happen until 2022.⁹

Nevertheless, the popularity of emojis will likely grow even more due to the Corona crisis. The reasons for this are obvious: On the one hand, if, in the future, personal encounters have to be kept to a minimum, people will resort to sending each other text messages even more often than before. This will increase the overall use of emojis (and perhaps more specifically of emojis that express emotions). On the other hand, people will more often talk to each other via telephone calls (as in the past) or will communicate via video conferences, which may lead to a decreasing use of emojis. However, video platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, or Google Meet also allow users to send text messages that may include emojis. Furthermore, during a call or video chat, users can select emojis to comment on something another person has said. Google Meet, Zoom, and Skype already provide several emojis that allow listeners to perform such so-called “real-time reactions” (cf. Fig. 6).

9. However, an interim solution for 2021 was announced on Emojipedia on July 24th, 2020: “With Unicode 14.0 delayed due to COVID-19, a minor emoji release known as Emoji 13.1 will fill the gap for phone users in 2021” (<https://blog.emojipedia.org/there-will-be-new-emojis-in-2021-after-all>, (29/8/2020)).

Thus, for instance, it is possible to send a thumbs up sign emoji while another person is speaking.

As evident from this screenshot, Google Meet users are invited to make further emoji suggestions that may be implemented in upcoming releases of the software. A question that arises in this context is whether (and how often) video chat participants actually make use of this option. In the next step, it would also be interesting to assess how this additional level of communication affects the person who is speaking, especially because emojis that express negative feelings can be sent as well. This last scenario is illustrated in the next screenshot that is taken from a one-to-one Skype conversation (cf. Fig. 7). While one person was talking, the other sent a frowning face emoji that appeared and briefly took up the whole screen before it disappeared again. Notably, this back-channel behaviour potentially irritates the speaker, which in turn could lead to her/him reacting immediately and changing the way the way s/he continues his or her turn.

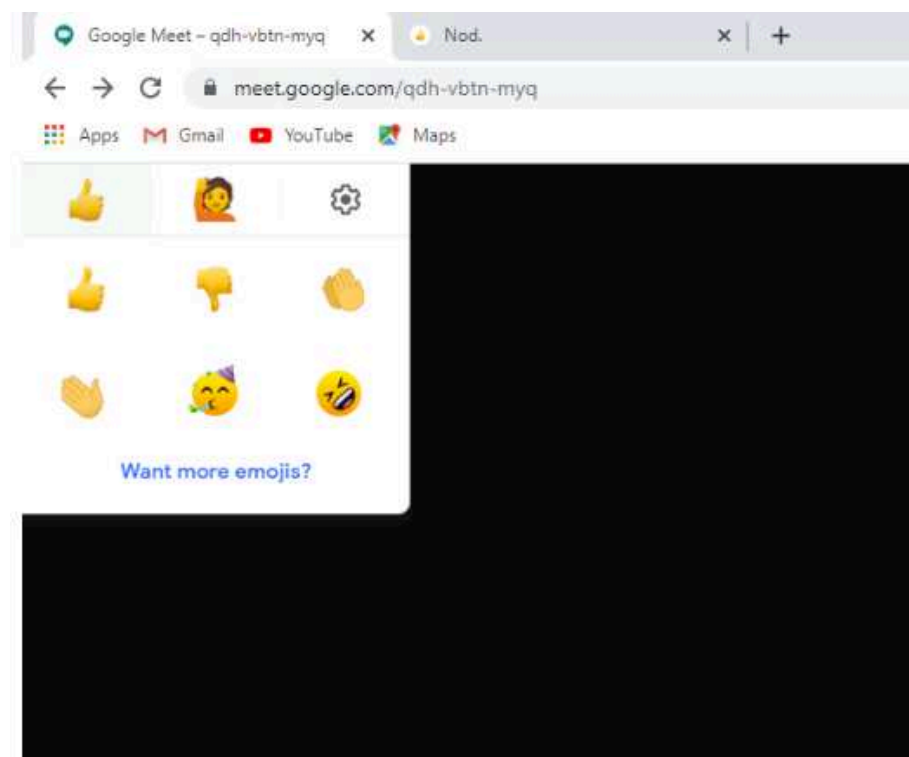


FIGURE 6. Emojis in Google Meet

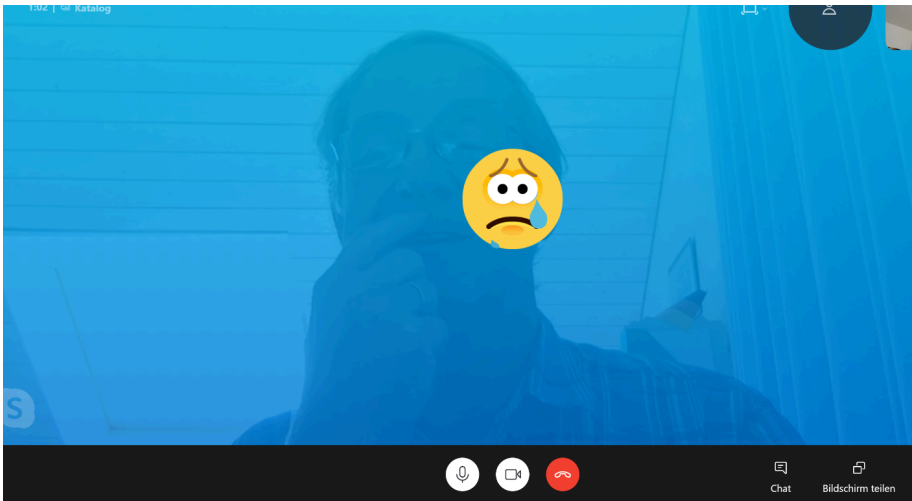


FIGURE 7. Real-time reaction in Skype

If more than two people are involved in the video chat, the emoji would not occupy the entire screen but (in Skype, for example) superimposes only the camera image of the person who sent it. Nevertheless, not only the person who is currently talking but all participants can see it.¹⁰ In a certain way, this kind of nonverbal reaction is comparable to noticing a listener's facial expressions while speaking in an 'offline', i.e., face-to-face conversation. However, whereas in a video chat, all participants will see this reaction (provided they are paying attention to the screen at the time when it is sent), this is not necessarily the case in an offline setting. To phrase it differently: online, it is not so easy to ignore this kind of back-channel behaviour, while in face-to-face conversations, the speaker as well as the other participants may overlook such a negative reaction.

Examples like this contribute to the impression that emojis are now indeed everywhere: they not only appear in combination with text anymore but have also become a part of digital-oral conversations. Of course, one could argue that emojis can also be sent in the text chat that runs parallel to video (or only audio) conversations, and that this has been possible for a long time. Against this background, it is justified to ask how the described emoji reactions differ from what has been previously practiced. Arguably, in text chats, emojis do not push themselves into the conversation in the same way that a real-time emoji reaction

10. Note that in Google Meet, for instance, emojis are not statically superimposed on the camera image but fly across the whole screen. This ensures that in video chats involving multiple participants, the reaction can really be seen by everyone.

does. Also, if the participants in a conversation have not opened the text chat window, they will not see the emojis at all. Besides, from a linguistic perspective, it is a fundamental difference whether emojis are used while reading and writing or while listening and talking. The latter constitutes a switch from the oral to the visual mode, while the former occurs entirely in the visual mode.

4. Outlook

“The revolution we’re experiencing at the moment [...] is centred around digital communication, the internet and mobile technology” (Seargeant, 2019, p. 190). This statement is found at the end of Seargeant’s book. We argue that from the perspective of the year 2020 (so far), we are currently not only in the midst of a digital-technological revolution but are also experiencing a non-digital development that affects our society in its very roots. The epidemiological situation we are facing has a massive impact on our daily lives—this also includes the way we use digital media. In the present essay, we mentioned only one example of this: Due to the Corona pandemic, video chat conversations supplemented by text chat have become omnipresent. As we have shown, this is accompanied by a new communication practice that some platforms offer: sending emojis as real-time reactions.

If this type of emoji use grows increasingly popular, it will no longer be sufficient to study emojis as a mere complement to or substitute for writing. In this case, linguists would have to address the question of which functions emojis serve in online oral communication and whether, possibly, the distinction between oral conversation (by default without emojis) and written conversation (often with emojis) must be reconsidered. Evidently, the current situation produces interesting new research questions—however, possibly ones we would prefer to leave behind as soon as we have reached the end of the Covis-19 crisis. Since if (or hopefully when) we finally return to offline meetings, the described back-channel behaviour will likely be discarded. Indeed, the image of someone holding up a sheet with an emoji on it to give a comment during an offline conversation certainly appears absurd. Or does it?

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